

Mediawatch

Meeting the public Bernard Dixon

During the last week of November, those of us within Europe should be celebrating the third European week for Scientific and Technological Culture (EWSTC). I say "should" because, if the first two annual celebrations are anything to go by, this year's event will pass off imperceptibly. Most working scientists, like most members of the public, will be entirely unaware that the occasion exists.

What is awry with this autumnal effort to underline the cultural dimension of scientific discovery is its heavy-handed, 'top-down', bureaucratic organization by the European Union. Every March, by contrast, the UK's National Science, Engineering and Technology Week thrives as a result of countless local efforts throughout the length and breadth of Britain. This is the very opposite of the centralist approach of the EWSTC which reduces its impact to near zero.

This is a shame — and a paradox. On the one hand, the archaic authoritarianism of the Brussels Eurocrats thwarts their well-meaning mission to bring science to the masses, creates obstacles to grass-roots initiatives and stifles creativity. On the other, there is more widespread enthusiasm than ever before to engage in this sort of activity. Scientists are increasingly keen to address the public, and to do so directly rather than through the work of journalists. This month, therefore, let's consider the largely unexploited opportunities for scientists to deal directly with society at large — through the media, certainly, but in other ways too.

Over the past year, eight or nine biological researchers have button-holed me, in some cases

during 'Communications Skills' courses which I help to tutor, and asked how to get their ideas into magazines, newspapers, radio or television. All wanted to contribute in ways other than through interviews with reporters. Yet they were uneasy about taking the initiative or convinced that their overtures would be rejected. Specific queries included why there were no openings in women's magazines for outside contributors and how to "get into writing Richard Dawkins-type books."

The answer to such queries is, quite simply, that, at least in the UK, newspapers, magazines, radio and TV programmes and publishing houses are more receptive than ever before to proposals of this sort. There are also courses, run by bodies such as the Wellcome Trust and the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC), for learning and brushing-up writing and other relevant skills.

The media are now more receptive than ever before to proposals from scientists

As a Board Member of the Edinburgh International Science Festival (EISF), which takes place for two weeks every April, I'm aware that more and more scientific societies are interested in organizing segments of the EISF programme. When the Festival began, in 1988, there was much more scepticism about taking part in an event specifically created to bring scientific findings and ideas to public attention. Since then the UK's Biochemical Society, Society for General Microbiology and others have made enormously helpful contributions and will be returning for the 1997 Festival, along with new partners.

For interested parties who have hesitated to take the plunge into the public arena, all that is required is the initial step of making a proposal.

The big mistake is to assume that the people running something will have thought of your idea or know about your field of research already. They probably haven't and don't.

Whether triggered directly by the Royal Society's Committee on the Public Understanding of Science or encouraged by the climate of thinking it has fostered, we are now seeing many initiatives to give scientific knowledge a wider circulation. *Modern Biotechnology — Towards Greater Understanding*, issued recently by the Food and Drink Federation together with the BBSRC and the Science Museum, is typical of a new genre of brochure seeking to influence public thinking on science and technology. Meanwhile the Wellcome Trust has taken its 'Genes Are Us' exhibition to such unlikely venues as Euston Railway Station, London, and the Motor Show in Birmingham. Last month Wellcome announced a £25 000 (\$40 000) prize for scientists to write Dawkins-type books — a handsome complement to the £10 000 (\$16 000) Rhone-Poulenc Prizes for science books.

The motives for scientists wishing to interact directly with the general public are richly varied. Some want to combat what they see as inaccurate information and distorted messages purveyed by the media. Some hope to reverse the unpopularity of science at school and the luke-warm enthusiasm towards degree courses. Others believe that scientific research is under-valued in society and hope to reassert its importance. A few see publicity as a crude lever with which to attract funding, while many worry about government neglect. Others simply wish to share the enjoyment and satisfaction they themselves feel in doing and knowing about science. Whatever the motivation, the opportunities to promote the public understanding of science and the sources of financial and practical help have never been greater.

Bernard Dixon is a freelance science writer based in Middlesex, UK.